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ABSTRACT

This brief fact sheet examines key aspects of communication, communication disabilities, and intervention. The fact sheet addresses the following questions: the nature of communication; communication disabilities (definitions of hearing impairments and speech and language impairments are given); effects of communication disabilities (factors affecting difficulty level); communication barriers (physical/environmental factors, attitudinal and behavioral factors); ways to improve communication (e.g., maximize, supplement, or simplify information); types of communication aids and services available (both personally prescribed devices and other devices or services); and suggestions for effective communication (e.g., ask the person with the disability about their needs and evaluate the accuracy and rate of information transfer and emotional reactions).
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COMMUNICATION Fact Sheet

What is COMMUNICATION?

- Communication is the way we interact with others and the world around us: Receiving, processing, and sending information to exchange thoughts, feelings, wants, and ideas, and to monitor changes in our environment.
- Communication takes place constantly and is involved in our every activity. Even during sleep we communicate with our environment (e.g., our hearing alerts us to fire alarms, telephones ringing).
- We communicate in many different ways—through touch, sight, hearing, smell, speech, writing, gesturing, and reading. Speaking and listening are the most common ways we communicate.
- Language is the system and rules we use to process and code information for communication.
- People experience communication disabilities when their ability to receive, send, or process information is reduced.

What are COMMUNICATION DISABILITIES?

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- Two major communication disabilities categories:
 - **Hearing impairments** affect between 21 to 28 million Americans (about 10% of U.S. population) of all ages. Hearing impairments are very common in older individuals, affecting up to 60% of those people over 65 years of age. Hearing losses range from mild (difficulty hearing soft sounds) to profound deafness (difficulty or inability to hear even loud sounds). The majority of people with hearing impairment are "hard-of-hearing" and rely in varying degrees on their hearing for communication. Many use amplification (e.g., hearing aids) to enhance their communication and listening functioning.
 - **Speech and language impairments** affect more than 3 million Americans of all ages. These impairments range from mild to severe difficulty in producing speech sounds; in fluency (stuttering); and producing or understanding language, reading, and writing due to learning disabilities, stroke, or head injury. Some people are unable to use speech or language at all. Many use assistive devices (e.g., speech output devices) to enhance their speaking and communication functioning.
- In many cases, people have multiple impairments (e.g., vision, mobility, and speech) that affect their communication ability.

What are the effects of COMMUNICATION DISABILITIES?

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What are COMMUNICATION (SPEECH AND HEARING) BARRIERS?

- **Different for each individual and communication activity**
- The amount of **difficulty varies with:**
 - type(s) and severity of impairment
 - ability to use other information sources or communication modalities, for example, the ability to speechread, ability to read
 - communication situation, such as, complexity of information, level of information, level of familiarity
 - differences or mismatches in primary communication mode, for example, manual sign language vs. spoken language
 - physical environment, for example, noise levels, lighting, distance between speaker/listener
 - ability to use and benefit from assistive devices or services.
- **Physical/environmental factors include:**
 - Noise
 - Rooms that echo or reverberate
 - Distance or barriers between the speaker/sound source and listener
 - Multiple speakers/sound sources
 - Low light levels/poor background that interfere with ability to speechread or see signing

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

continued

What are WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION?

What types of COMMUNICATION AIDS AND SERVICES are available?

What are suggestions for EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION?

- Fast-paced or hurried situations
- Complex or lengthy information
- Aural (hearing)-only or visual-only information
- **Attitudinal and behavioral factors** (toward person with disability) include:
 - Impatience
 - Prejudice
 - Poor communication style (e.g., hand covering face, rapid speech)
- **Maximize information** in the impaired modality
 - Amplification devices (e.g., hearing aids, assistive listening devices)
 - Alternative and augmentative devices for speech and language impairments (e.g., manual or electronic communication boards, voice amplifier)
- **Supplement information** using other modalities (e.g., visual, tactile)
- **Simplify information** in the impaired modality (e.g., simplify and slowdown speech, rephrase)
- **Use a combination of modalities**
- **Remove physical barriers or change place of communication**
- Personally prescribed devices (e.g., hearing aids, electronic communication and speech output systems)
- Devices and services that can be used in addition to or instead of personally prescribed devices to:
 - **Enhance or amplify acoustic information**
For example, assistive listening devices for groups, individuals; hearing aid compatible telephones; amplified telephone handsets/mouthpieces; amplified alerting, signaling, and warning systems.
 - **Provide visual and/or tactile information**
For example, telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) or text telephone; flashing or strobe alarm lights; vibrotactile (sense of touch) alerting, signaling, and warning devices; captioning (open and closed, real-time); computer-assisted note taking; written, graphic, or symbolic materials; facsimile machines that have visual signals.
 - **Translate or facilitate communication information**
For example, interpreter services (cued speech, oral, sign language); TDD/telephone relay systems; augmentative communication devices (e.g., wordboards, speech output devices, writing aids); computers and electronic communications; hearing assistance dogs.
- **Ask the person** with the disability about their needs
- **Consider the communication situation** (e.g., nature, length, and complexity)
- **Evaluate the accuracy** and rate of information transfer and emotional reactions
- **Select appropriate aids and services**, giving consideration to individual preferences
- **Use a combination of aids and services with appropriate communication techniques**, for example, speaking clearly in normal tone of voice, writing key words, using short sentences, gesturing, signing, looking directly at listener when speaking.

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